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ABSTRACT

Forty-four randomly selected parents of handicapped students from two New England school districts described their level of participation in special education referral, planning, and placement process by responding to questions either in writing or orally in a telephone interview. Among responses were the following: 93% of parents were notified of the individualized education program (IEP) meeting; 39% reported not doing anything special to get ready for the meeting; 63% thought their opinions were considered by other people at the meeting; and 57% knew by the end of the meeting how and when the effectiveness of the IEP program would be evaluated. Results suggested a need to increase active parental participation through the establishment of professional guidelines for conferences with parents; identification of a liaison person to explain the IEP process to the parents; and provision of parental training through flyers, meeting preparation worksheets, or a video tape portraying meaningful parental participation. (DB)

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Parents' Perceptions

Of Participation

in Developing the

Individualized Education Program

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A major policy theme of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 is the individualized education program (IEP). Policy related to the individualized education program is based upon three interrelated goals: "to improve the quality of education for handicapped children, to increase parental participation in the educational process, and to institute a mechanism for accountability at the local level" (Pappas, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to describe the level of parental involvement in developing the IEP as reported by the parents themselves.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Some issues related to the individualized education program were identified in Project IEP - a four state program evaluation project which applied a naturalistic/judicial inquiry model (1977). Parents were perceived as contributers of unique information, able to provide continuity to their child's educational program, and capable of developing realistic expectations about their child's potential through participating in development of the IEP.

The parents' participation in IEP development was investigated by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (1979). Results indicated that a large number of parents attended IEP meetings - 83% of the 2,400 parents polled. However, more than half, 52%, said that the IEP was completed before the meeting they were invited to attend.

The school's perspective of parental involvement in the pupil planning process was investigated by Yoshida (1978). Through analyses of responses provided by a large sample of planning and placement team

members, two activities were selected as being appropriate for parental participation: gathering information relevant to the case and presenting information relevant to the case. These results suggest a limited participatory role for parents and some resistance by educators to meaningful parent involvement. This position seems to support the prediction of McAfee and Vergason (1979); they felt that educators would be threatened by parent involvement and that educators would convince parents that they are not needed. Parents typically have little to do with the development of educational programs for their children, although research (Clements and Alexander, 1975) has provided support for parent involvement in the education of handicapped children.

At the IEP meeting itself, the role of the parent as a recipient of information seems dominant. Goldstein and her colleagues (1980) attempted to observe twenty-one previously scheduled IEP conferences. When seven students' parents did not attend scheduled IEP conferences, the conferences were either rescheduled or the IEP was sent home for the parents signatures. In these instances, the IEP had been written by educators prior to the conference. "Thus, the purpose of the conference could be viewed as informing parents of the nature of the already developed IEP, obtaining any suggestions from them for modification, and receiving their approval" (pp 281-282).

Recent data (Say, McCollum, and Brightman, 1980) suggest that "IEP of students whose parents either attended the ARD/IEP meeting or signed the IEP document were more accurate than those IEPs where parents did not attend the meeting nor signed the IEP document" (p 23). Accuracy, in this study, reflects clear inclusion of information required by regulations ~~and internal consistency within the IEP~~.

A large discrepancy appears to exist between the promise of parental participation as identified in Project IEP and the practice of parental participation as described by Yoshida, Goldstein, Say and their colleagues. Concern has been expressed that "schools may limit the parental role to one of merely observing the planning team proceedings. On the other hand, schools may view the parents as having a necessary and integral role in the planning process..." (Yoshida, 1978).

METHODOLOGY

To further explore this apparent discrepancy, answers to a series of questions were acquired from parents of handicapped students residing in two New England school districts. These two school districts participated in a project designed to facilitate implementation of the individualized education program as a placement tool, an instructional tool, and a planning tool.

A draft version of questions to be asked of parents was revised and data collection procedures were identified by a Steering Committee in each school district.

In District One, twenty-seven parents of handicapped students were randomly selected for interview by telephone; fifteen parents of students enrolled in resource programs and twelve parents of students enrolled in self-contained programs were identified. Approximately one week before the interview, a letter was sent to each parent describing the purpose of the telephone interview.

In District Two, parents of thirty-two students were randomly selected. The parents of fifteen students enrolled in resource programs and parents of seventeen students enrolled in self-contained programs were identified. A two phase data collection procedure was employed in District Two. First, a thirty-one item multiple choice questionnaire was mailed to selected parents of students. Parents were provided the option either of completing the questionnaire and returning it in a stamped self-addressed envelope or keeping the questionnaire and awaiting a telephone interview.

Names and telephone numbers of the randomly selected parents were acquired from the special education administrator in each school district. Interviews were conducted by five special educators and a multi-lingual teacher. All interviewers were familiar with the special education referral, planning, and placement process in each district. The multi-lingual teacher was employed by District One and conducted interviews with six non-English speaking parents in District One. The five special educators were not employed by either district.

In District Two, responses were acquired from twenty-five of thirty-two parents (78%). Thirteen of fifteen parents of resource students provided information (87%) and twelve of the seventeen parents of students in self-contained settings provided information (70%). The parents of six students enrolled in resource programs and parents of five students enrolled in self-contained classes returned the questionnaires in District Two. A combined district response rate of 75% (44/59) was acquired.

Eight parents were not interviewed in District One. In four cases, the number listed by the school department was inaccurate; accurate numbers were not available through directory assistance. In two cases the number provided was that of a neighbor or relative; in spite of repeated efforts and assurances, a return call was not received. Despite multiple calls at various times during the day and evening, interviewers were unable to reach parents of two students.

In District Two, parents of seven students were not interviewed. Two telephones had been disconnected; two homes could not be reached even through multiple calls at various times. In one case, the number available through the school department was not accurate and the correct number could not be found. One family had an unlisted number, and one parent did not want to answer questions.

A three hour interviewer-training session addressed logistical factors, the interview schedule, and rehearsal of the interview strategy. The interview schedule included thirty-one multiple choice questions with the number of response options ranging from three to seven. Questions were arranged so as to parallel the time sequence of the special education referral, planning and placement process. Questions in the following areas were included: introduction (four questions), student assessment (six questions), the IEP meeting (ten questions), IEP content (7 questions), and conclusion (four questions). The interview strategy emphasized an informal conversational tone directed toward a review of the special education referral, planning and placement process as experienced with their child. Interviewers described a high degree of parental interest and cooperation during the interview.

RESULTS

Responses provided by these parents reflect opportunity for involvement in the development of individualized education programs for their children. Parenthesized figures represent the percentage of parents who provided the described responses. Parents (73%) reported awareness of testers and the kinds of testing to be performed (66%). Participation in the testing process itself was limited to either observing tests being performed (5%) or answering questions about their child (9%). Results of the testing process were usually reported orally in a way that was understandable.

Nearly all parents were notified of IEP meetings (93%). Parental understanding of reasons for IEP meetings were variable; most parents knew the meeting was directed toward either identifying the specially designed instruction to be received or student placement (78%). Many parents (80%) reported attending their child's first IEP meeting.

When asked how they got ready for the IEP meeting, parents' responses were quite variable. Seventeen parents (39%) reported not doing anything special to get ready for the meeting other than getting to it. Six (14%) parents reported discussing their child and his education with spouse, relatives, and/or friends. Seventeen (39%) parents thought about their child, his education and things they wanted to know and say. Three parents (7%) made notes to themselves about what they wanted to know and say.

Parents reported many different forms of participation in IEP meetings. They listened carefully (77%), asked questions (64%), answered questions (39%), presented information (25%) and participated

in discussions of information (36%). Thirty-two parents (73%) reported describing what their child can or cannot do well and what they would like to have him learn this year in school.

Twenty-eight parents (63%) thought their opinions were considered by other people at the meeting; eight parents (18%) did not know if their opinions had been considered by other people at the IEP meeting. Six parents did not identify the extent to which their opinions were considered.

The pattern of parental responses to questions about either the accuracy or the appropriateness of present level of performance statements, annual goals, and short term objectives was similar. Seven parents (16%) consistently reported not knowing about the accuracy or appropriateness of these IEP components; four parents (9%) did not respond to these questions; four parents (9%) thought present level of performance statements were inaccurate and five parents (11%) viewed annual goals and short term instructional objectives to be inappropriate. Twenty-nine parents (66%) thought statements which described their child's present levels of performance were accurate. Twenty-eight parents (64%) considered both annual goals and instructional objectives to be appropriate for their child.

At the end of the IEP meeting, twenty-five parents (57%) knew how and when the effectiveness of the program provided their child would be evaluated. Fifteen parents (34%) did not know how or when program effectiveness would be evaluated; and no response to this question was elicited from four parents (9%).

Thirty-eight parents (86%) thought the special education services being provided were responsive to the needs of their children. Four parents (9%) did not know if such services were responsive to the needs of their child and two parents (5%) did not think the services being provided were responsive to the needs of their children.

The level of satisfaction experienced by parents with the progress their child was making in school was addressed in the last question. Five parents (11%) were extremely well satisfied with their children's school progress; sixteen parents (36%) were very pleased with their children's school progress. Four parents (9%) were displeased and two parents (5%) were very dissatisfied with the progress their children were making in school.

DISCUSSION

Forty-four randomly selected parents of handicapped students described their level of participation in the special education referral, planning, and placement process by responding to questions either in writing or orally in a telephone interview. Generally, these parents viewed themselves as active participants in a process which provides educational experiences that contribute to the progress their children make in school. However, these parents see themselves functioning on the fringe of the formal assessment process. If the content of an IEP is based upon data acquired within the assessment process, action to increase meaningful parental participation must be initiated. Action which requires active parental participation in reviewing their child's

referral for special education consideration is desirable. For those students already receiving special education, an annual review of instructionally relevant evaluation information is recommended. Moreover, parents should be encouraged to collect and present their own instructionally relevant information.

Some reservations about the passive recipient of information parent role are supported by these parents' responses. Not doing anything special to get ready for meetings, listening carefully and answering questions at the meeting illustrate a reactive quality to parental preparation for and participation in IEP meetings.

The understanding a parent has about reasons for the IEP meeting may influence the way (s)he gets ready for it. How a parent gets ready for the meeting may influence the level of participation in the meeting. Level of participation in the meeting may increase parents' confidence in the appropriateness and accuracy of IEP content. For this pattern to become clearly established, purposes of the IEP meeting must be clear to parents; parents' preparation for IEP meetings is required; and, full consideration of parents' opinions must be more clearly communicated by professionals.

Partial support for the preceding pattern of parental behavior is found in this study.

Professional guidelines should be established for conferences with parents. These guidelines would be directed toward establishing rapport and facilitating communication among parents and educators. For example, a school and family liaison person should be identified.

This person could be either a staff member or a trained volunteer. This individual would orient and familiarize the parent(s) to the IEP process. This liaison person would accompany the parent to the conference and seat themselves close by to provide information and moral support to the parent(s). Parental prompts to provide information or ask questions could also be provided.

Any parent should not have to enter an already occupied conference room. One or two meeting participants could greet the parent at the door and other participants should join the group after the parent is seated. Educators should attend to often over-looked social amenities. For example, hanging a parent's coat and an offer of coffee or other refreshment are simple yet effective means of lessening anxiety and promoting rapport. All meeting participants should wear identifying name and role tags unless the group has met often enough that familiarity exists among the members. In some cases the parent will be able to assert themselves, and not require extra attention; however, there are many who will benefit from this type of assistance.

Parent training for effective participation in developing and implementing IEPs should be initiated when youngsters are referred for special education consideration. In addition to one's legal rights, a brief flyer which graphically presents parental participation in the process should be provided. A brief case study illustration together with meeting preparation worksheets should be reviewed. A video tape which portrays meaningful parental participation should be observed and discussed.

IEP meetings are held to make decisions about the specially designed instruction to be received by each handicapped student. "Specially designed instruction" includes what is taught, how it is taught, and when it is taught (Cawley, 1980). Parents should describe what they consider valuable for their children to learn.

Collaborative decision making among the student's teacher, an administrator and a parent will enhance the specially designed instruction provided.

A collaboratively designed IEP may coordinate home and school instructional efforts. Coordinated instructional efforts which are jointly reviewed can improve the quality of education experienced by all handicapped students.

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